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# El Paso joins Gov. Greg Abbott in busing migrants to New York City

The Democrat-led city sent 35 migrants from Venezuela as New York officials have complained that Abbott’s busing is straining city services.

BY CINDY RAMIREZ, **EL PASO MATTERS** AUG. 26, 2022 1 PM CENTRAL



A charter bus that took a group of migrants from El Paso to New York City this week. Courtesy of Opportunity Center for the Homeless

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The city government of El Paso chartered a bus this week to send 35 Venezuelan migrants to New York City, a step meant to address a growing number of people from the South American country crossing from Mexico.

The move by the Democrat-led city comes as New York officials have been raising complaints about Republican Texas Gov. [Greg Abbott](#) sending busloads of migrants to their city without warning. The buses sent by Texas have strained social services in New York, which promises shelter to virtually every unhoused person in its borders.

But some advocates say the busing is beneficial for the migrants, who receive safe and comfortable transportation to their final destinations after an often arduous excursion.

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“It’s a journey that we never expected to experience,” Roxeli, a Venezuelan migrant, said aboard an El Paso United Charters bus heading to New York City on Tuesday. “It was a rough environment. We had to cross oceans, rivers, jungles — countries where perhaps we weren’t welcome.”

Around her, other smiling migrants settled into their seats, ate pizza and sandwiches provided by volunteers, and prayed for their safety during the next leg of their journey.

“For a better future for our children, we’re capable of getting anywhere,” said Roxeli, whom El Paso Matters is identifying only by first name as she is fleeing violence and fears for her safety. Her comments were captured by the Opportunity Center for the Homeless, which has been caring for an increasing number of unhoused migrants in El Paso.

The charter from El Paso to New York was arranged by the El Paso City-County Office of Emergency Management — one of several the city says it has chartered to transport migrants out of the region.

City officials haven't responded to questions about how many buses they've chartered or where the buses have gone.

"OEM has sponsored and provided transportation services for migrants out of El Paso, which is reimbursable through [the Federal Emergency Management Agency]," Deputy City Manager Mario D'Agostino said in an email. "OEM has sponsored charter buses to include a recent transport to New York City, this was the preferred destination for those without any means to travel."

The federal government has said it will reimburse local governments and nongovernmental organizations coping with the migrant influx.

Ruben Garcia, the founder of Annunciation House in El Paso, which has been serving migrants for 40 years, said previous bus charters from El Paso were used to move migrants to churches in Dallas and Denver, which are major transportation hubs. From there, it was easier for migrants to arrange transportation to join family and friends in the United States.

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On June 21, the Office of Emergency Management chartered a bus to send 50 migrants to Faith Forward, an alliance of Dallas religious leaders, Garcia said.

He said faith-based groups are crucial to assisting the growing number of migrants crossing into the United States from Mexico.

"If faith communities in the interior of the U.S. would all be willing to receive one charter bus every week or two, there would be no hospitality issue all along the U.S. border with Mexico. We wouldn't have to blindly send chartered buses to D.C., New York and Miami. In other words, we would not play politics with human lives and instead have a living, breathing Statue of Liberty," Garcia said.

Tuesday's bus charter is similar to controversial programs by Abbott and Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey to send migrants from border communities to Washington, D.C.,

and New York City. Abbott and Ducey have loudly publicized their efforts, while the city of El Paso had not made its transportation efforts public until questioned by El Paso Matters.

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## What's happening in New York

Five buses carrying 223 migrants arrived in New York City on Thursday, said Shaina Coronel, director of communications with the New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. The majority of the migrants were from Venezuela, with some from Colombia and other countries, she added.

Four of the five buses are presumed to have been part of Abbott's controversial initiative to transport migrants to Washington, D.C., and New York using private donations.

Busing migrants out of Texas is a way to provide "much-needed relief to our overwhelmed border communities," Abbott said in an Aug. 19 news release.

New York City officials said Thursday that they were unaware a fifth bus was arriving from El Paso — raising questions about whether officials with the city of El Paso or the OEM are coordinating with the receiving cities for the migrants' care.

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“Migrants are provided care packages and OEM coordinates with officials to receive them,” D’Agostino said in the statement.

Coronel said that her office hasn’t had any communication with anybody from El Paso — including city leaders, the Office of Emergency Management or any nonprofit involved in the transport of migrants to New York.

“Texas Gov. Abbott’s office remains unwilling to coordinate and communicate with us on when these buses are arriving and how many people they’re carrying, but we’ve been working with nonprofits on the ground [in Texas] to prepare as best we could,” she said, adding that was not the case with El Paso.

Using charter buses, Abbott had transported more than 7,400 migrants to the U.S. capital and more than 1,500 to New York as of this week, his office said Friday. None of the buses chartered by Abbott is known to have come from El Paso.

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## **Venezuelans face special challenges**

Migrants who are released by Immigration and Customs Enforcement — often because they have shown a credible fear of persecution in their home countries — are given hearing dates in immigration courts near their preferred destinations.

In El Paso, migrants released by ICE typically go to shelters in the Annunciation House network, where they stay two to three days while they arrange travel to reunite with family across the country.

Some migrants who can't arrange transportation wind up unhoused in El Paso and other border cities because migrant shelters can't provide shelter for more than a few days.

Unlike migrants from other countries, those from Venezuela often lack sponsor families in the United States ready to provide them with housing or assist with travel, Garcia of Annunciation House said.

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That was the case with the group from El Paso this week.

“From our standpoint, we just want to make sure we’re doing right by the families who come here and by the government that sets the laws,” said John Martin, director of El Paso’s Opportunity Center for the Homeless.

Martin said that last week, a small group of migrants arrived at the Welcome Center in South El Paso, a project of the new El Paso Ayuda initiative comprising several nonprofits that serve the homeless. Within three days, that group of migrants grew to nearly 40, primarily from Venezuela, he said.

“The Welcome Center is here to support our local homeless population, but by definition, the Venezuelans who come here and have nowhere to go are therefore homeless in our community,” Martin said.

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There, they could stay up to two weeks — or longer if needed.

“We’re not going to kick anyone out on the streets, but we do have a goal to have a place for them to go within two weeks,” Martin said.

In the statement, D’Angostino called the increased number of migrants arriving at the border a “humanitarian concern.” The statement said the busing and transportation services for migrants are to keep them safe from the elements and a way to keep area homeless shelters from overflowing.

The number of Venezuelans encountered by the U.S. Border Patrol at the Southwest border has skyrocketed to nearly 128,600 as of July this fiscal year. That’s two-and-a-half times more than in all of the 2021 fiscal year that ended in September, according to the latest agency statistics.

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Nearly 1,200 of those encounters were in the El Paso Sector, three times more than in all of the 2021 fiscal year.

Venezuelans have been largely exempt from Title 42, a health code provision used by the Trump and Biden administrations to expel tens of thousands of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border since 2020.

The vast majority of the Venezuelans crossing the U.S.-Mexico border have been encountered in the Del Rio Sector in southwestern Texas and Yuma, Arizona, Border Patrol statistics show.

## Displacement crisis

In July, the Department of Homeland Security extended the [Temporary Protected Status](#) designation for migrants from Venezuela for 18 months, effective in September.

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The status, which allows migrants from designated countries to reside legally in the United States temporarily, applies only to those living in the United States as of March 2021. DHS estimates some 343,000 Venezuelans are eligible for the protective status originally approved in March 2021 by the Biden administration.

At that time and again with the recent extension, the administration cited the South American country's political and economic turmoil under President Nicolas Maduro's regime.

The [Migration Policy Institute](#) in a 2020 report also pointed to Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, for the instability in the country — much of it due to fluctuations in the petroleum market.

“Venezuelans have experienced a sharp decline in economic fortunes, sky-high inflation, rising corruption, and political persecution,” the report states.

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More than 6 million Venezuelans have fled the country over violence, insecurity and lack of food and basic services, according to data collected by the [United Nations’ refugee agency](#), which has called this the second-largest external displacement crisis in the world, behind Syria.

That was the case for a family of 10 Venezuelans — parents, children, grandchildren and in-laws — who about 10 days ago crossed the Rio Grande into El Paso and requested asylum.

“We decided to leave Venezuela because of the country’s situation,” a woman in the group aboard the charter bus said. “I wanted my children to have opportunities and for my family to get ahead.”

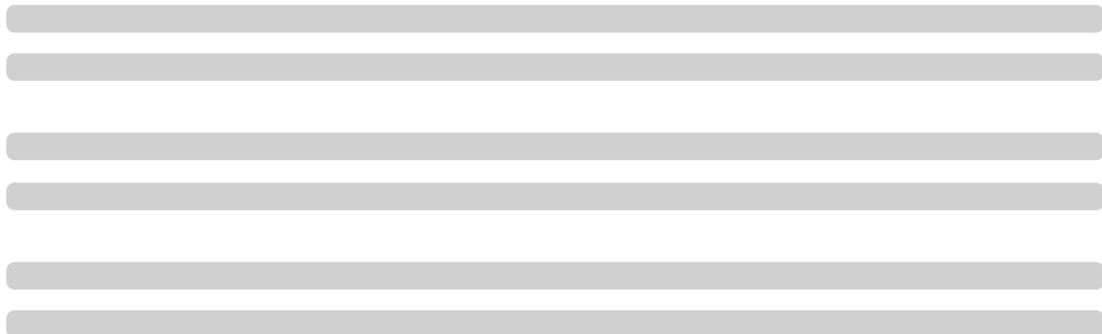
Before they headed out to New York from the Welcome Center on Tuesday, the busload of migrants recited the Lord’s Prayer with Father Rafael Garcia of nearby Sacred Heart Catholic Church.

“May God bless you all and your families left behind,” Garcia said.

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